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Testimony of Senator Toni Boucher
In opposition of SB 476, An Act Cornering Nonviolent Drug Possession Offenses.

Chairman Andrew McDonald, Chairman Michael Lawlor, Ranking Member John Kissel, Ranking Member Arthur O'Neill and other distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary, today I testify in opposition of SB 476, An Act Concerning Nonviolent Drug Possession Offenses.

I became aware of the detrimental impact of marijuana use several years ago after a very emotional and tearful appeal from a mother and father who had found their talented son dead from a drug overdose at home in his bed. Marijuana, a gateway for other drugs, was cited by his parents as the real killer of their son. Their personal appeal and countless others are the reason I advocate so strongly against the effort to decriminalize marijuana, which this bill does by reducing the penalty to an infraction – like a simple parking ticket.

Unfortunately, the stories of lives cut short or wasted due to an addiction to marijuana are repeated throughout my district and this country. Our jails are filled with substance abusers (by some counts, over 80%), most started at a very early of age when the drug tenaciously fuses itself inside the brain wiring as it develops. When I ask our veteran foster parents and Department of Children and Families workers how their foster children came to them, in the vast majority of cases they point to the drug addiction of the foster children's parents.

The injurious effects of marijuana are now validated by scientific research. And, the conclusions found in numerous research regarding the effects of marijuana are alarming. In Connecticut alone, Yale University and the University of Connecticut Medical Societies have determined that smoking marijuana causes damages to the brain, heart, immune system, and lungs, as well as impairs learning, memory, perception and judgment. There is now conclusive evidence that smoking marijuana gives you greater exposure to cancerous chemicals than from tobacco.

Other studies link marijuana use with the loss of motor skills, increased heart rate, and impairment of the ability of the body's T-Cell to fight off infections. The drug treatment centers of Connecticut cite that 60% of their admissions are now for marijuana addiction.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, an extensive analysis of longitudinal studies on marijuana use and risk of mental illness later in life showed that marijuana use increases the risk of developing mental disorders by 40 %. This same study concludes that marijuana and depression are a dangerous combination: "Weekly or more frequent use of marijuana doubles a teen's risk of depression and anxiety. Depressed teens are more than twice as likely as their peers to abuse or become dependent on marijuana." A recent study from the University of Colorado has concluded that marijuana use in adolescence is associated with the subsequent development of depression. Furthermore, International Institutes of Health are showing a 30% increase in the instance of Schizophrenia in regular marijuana user, particularly in the young users. The United Kingdom is rethinking their entire public health policy due to these new findings.

SB 476 would erode the progress made over the years to combat marijuana usage, and history has already proven the enormous damages that decriminalization has on society. During the 1970s numerous states decriminalized marijuana, and as a result America rose to the highest levels of youth drug use of any civilized nation. Outcry from parent groups overturned these decriminalizing policies and with strong education, enforcement, and treatment this trend was reversed. Sadly, the decriminalization trend has resurfaced. You do not need to look any further than California, a state that legalized medical marijuana over a decade ago, to witness how destructive decriminalizing has been on the state where abuse of the state's marijuana law is rampant and where drug cartels from Mexico have taken over public land to use it to cultivate marijuana (Associated Press. Alicia Caldwell and Manuel Valdes. "Drug Gangs Taking Over US Public Land" March 2010). Young people are smoking marijuana in schools with prescriptions, many falsely obtained for something as simple as a head or foot ache. There is no question decades of drug prevention efforts would be undermined by passage of this proposal.

It is my understanding that the motivation behind this legislation is to save money from the expenses incurred by the law enforcement and judicial system – the thought is that this legislation would decrease the judicial caseload. However, this rationale is a distortion of the facts and completely incorrect. The number of less than one-ounce marijuana possession cases is not even close to being significant enough to impact the caseload. The courts will still operate during businesses hours and prosecutors and staff will still have plenty of cases to process. Less than one-ounce possession cases are only a small drop in the judicial case backlog. If we put aside for the moment, the fact that marijuana is an illegal narcotic which is chronically abused in our country, and readily available to school aged children. The cost to our health care system, substance abuse treatment centers, mental health centers, and our foster care system would wipe out any previous savings it may potentially generate at first. This bill would not accomplish the financial savings that the proponents proclaim. And, SB 476 should not use these financially difficult times to justify a proposal that has such damaging health effects.

It's unfortunate that the same General Assembly who legislatively addresses quality of life and health issues, like trans-fat and second hand smoke, would ever consider a bill that decriminalizes a substance which has such noxious effects. No elected official can ignore the social and health consequences that marijuana use imposes on the people of this country -

particularly children who are much more vulnerable to addiction. This bill undermines all the work and effort of drug prevention advocates and would put Connecticut on a path that would undermine the health and well being of its residents.

Thank you for your thoughtful and careful consideration of this testimony and urge you to oppose SB 476.